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A Sociology of Nothing: Understanding the Unmarked

Abstract

Nothing is a sociologically neglected terrain, comprising negatively defined phenomena, such as non-identification, non-participation and non-presence. Nevertheless, these symbolic social objects are created and managed through meaningful social interaction. Nothing is accomplished either by active commission (doing/being a non-something) or by passive omission (not-doing/not-being something). I explore these dichotomous forms through four dimensions of negative social space: non-identity, inactivity, absence and silence. Paradoxically, nothing is always productive of something: other symbolic objects come into being through the apprehension of phantoms, imaginaries, replacements and alternatives, which generate further constitutive meanings. A sociological analysis illuminates these processes, revealing how much nothing matters.

Keywords

Absence, emptiness, identity, invisibility, nothing, silence, Symbolic Interactionism

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Introduction

Sociology is conventionally defined as the study of social *things*: processes, structures and forces that shape individual behaviour (Durkheim 1895). Deviant activities, marginalised groups and social problems seem particularly to capture the sociological imagination (Mills 1959). However, analysing these tangible things may give a misleading impression of their salience compared to *no-things*. As Brekhus (1998) argues, deviance commands a disproportionate amount of sociological attention relative to its actual prevalence and frequency. It is 'marked' as noteworthy, while 'unmarked' phenomena pass under the sociological radar. Consequently, the background terrain of the normal (Misztal 2015), remains epistemologically neglected.

The sociology of everyday life has gone some way to correcting this through the study of mundane behaviour: making the familiar strange by highlighting seen-but-unnoticed, taken-for-granted rules and routines (Garfinkel 1967; Moran 2005; Scott 2009). Yet even here, the focus has remained largely on what people *do* and *are* in quotidian settings, for example waiting behaviour in liminal non-places, such as bus stops (Moran 2005), and the globalization of non-services (Ritzer 2007). I argue that mundaneness extends further, from doings and beings to non-doings and non-beings, which also form part of the cultural fabric. As well as studying how people performatively 'do nothing', we should ask why they might 'not do' or 'not be' potential things, and the spaces this creates in social life.

Here I respond to Brekhus's (1998) call for a 'sociology of the unmarked' that reverses the epistemological polarity between figure and ground. Shifting the focus from positively defined somethings and somebodies to negatively defined nothings and nobodies, I propose a distinction between two modes of social action that accomplish negative social phenomena. In addition to demonstrative 'acts of commission' (doing nothing), I emphasise more passive 'acts of omission' (not-doing /not-being something). Taking a Symbolic Interactionist perspective, I suggest that the latter social forms (non-identity, non-participation and non-presence) are significant symbolic objects (Blumer 1969), with social causes and consequences. Despite being negatively defined by lack or absence, they are constructed as meaningful by the reflexive social actors who manage them.

Accomplishing nothing: social acts of commission and omission

The concept of nothing has long intrigued philosophers, scientists and artists as something mysterious and unknowable. Just like its correlates 'anything' and 'everything', it connotes ideas of infinity and eternity, which are difficult to imagine. Green (2011) makes a distinction between 'nothingness' as the *absence of something* (a specific, replaceable object), and 'nothing' as the *absence of everything* (a void of absolute emptiness). The former is used in mathematics, where the zero symbol denotes the quantity 'none', and in physics, where vacuums are shown to be filled with energy or matter, such as gravitational waves, magnetic fields or subatomic particles. Meanwhile, the latter informs philosophical theories, such as the 'denial of death' as an existentially terrifying prospect of non-being (Becker 1973).

In social life, however, nothing is not just a passively endured condition, but a reflexively managed mode of experience. Choosing not to do something, disengaging from a group, or finding nothing to relate to in a dominant cultural script, can all be considered demonstrations of individual agency, suggesting a critically distant interpretation of one's

situation. Nothing must be accomplished, or 'done', whether or not we are aware of doing it. In Sartre's (1943) existentialist theory, recognising and taking responsibility for the nothingness that surrounds us means acting in 'good faith', exercising autonomous free will to create meaning for ourselves. These are Meadian 'acts', involving stages of perception, impulse, manipulation and consummation by a self-reflexive subject towards a social object (Mead 1934): consciousness is always conscious *of* something (Sartre, *ibid.*), even if that something is negated.

The communication of these private meanings to others, and their acknowledgement (or not) of this constitutes a further act, which is by definition social. Micro-level gestures of power and resistance can be expressed in everyday talk about nothingness. For example, consider the exchange, "*What are you doing?*" / "*Nothing...*", whereby the reply defends the doing of a 'something' that is none of the enquirer's business. Stating that one 'did nothing' at the weekend is a performance of idleness as conspicuous leisure, signalling freedom from the obligation to do unwanted things.

'Nothing' is therefore a form of Weberian *social action* (Weber 1904). It fits the two criteria of (1) being meaningful to the actor and (2) taking into account others - social objects such as people, institutions or discourses - and being thereby oriented in its course.

I suggest that this can unfold in two different ways. *Acts of commission* occur when we choose to avoid doing/being something, through conscious disengagement or dis-identification: for example, refusing medical treatment, strike action, anti-capitalist freeganism, conscientious objection to military conscription, or rejecting a sex/gender assignation. When demonstrably 'doing nothing', the actor considers but rejects a normatively expected action for its negative associational meanings. They may need to skilfully manage social reactions to this as deviance in everyday life, for example when negotiating the performance of the sleep role (Williams 2005) or accounting for oneself as a non-drinker (Birenbaum & Sagarin 1973). *Acts of omission* occur when we more passively neglect or fail to act, ending up in another position by default rather than conscious intention. This might include agnosticism (not developing a religious faith), not speaking out or standing up against injustice, not pursuing an intimate relationship, not using home computers (Selwyn 2003) or not consuming 'D.I.Y.' over-the-counter pharmaceuticals (Will and Weiner 2015). These actors do not feel strongly disinclined towards one option so much as drawn towards another, which holds more meaning. Such acts of not-doing or not-being, and the hypothetical things that remain undone, are both intangible and infinite, hence their neglected study.

Insofar as both of these patterns of social action unfold in situated encounters with significant others, they can be understood as social *interaction*. Accomplishing nothing involves definitions and negotiations of meaning (Thomas and Thomas 1928; Strauss 1978), relational selfhood (Mead 1934), and the co-ordination of *joint* action (Blumer 1969; Manis and Meltzer 1972). As Mullaney (2001) argues, when non-doings form the basis of identity display, they must be witnessed and ratified by an audience in order to be successfully accomplished. Refusals, conversely, prevent or limit the actor's capacity to do nothing. This invites a Symbolic Interactionist analysis of the micro-social processes through which people come *not* to do or become things that they might otherwise have been, negotiate these options, and manage the social reactions that ensue.

Reverse-marking negative space

Brekhus (1998) argues that there is an epistemological asymmetry in our perception of social phenomena. What he calls the 'marked' – empirically unusual, politically salient, ontologically uncommon or morally critical – commands a disproportionate amount of attention, so that we train the sociological gaze upon the extreme, exotic, unusual and deviant. These visible, colourful objects stand out as remarkable, echoing Bakhtin's (1968) notion of the carnivalesque: exaggerated contrasts from the mundane and routine. Meanwhile, the 'unmarked' background of contextual ordinariness remains unexamined, taken for granted as normal. The marked/unmarked distinction stems from linguistics, where one item of a lexical pair is highlighted while the other is passively defined by the absence of emphasis. The unmarked therefore represents the normative case, default condition or generic type.

Value judgements may be built into these contrast pairs, when the marked category is denoted as deviant and subordinate compared to the dominance and assumed neutrality of the unmarked. Brekhus suggests that this can occur in binary or trinary formations, whereby the unmarked comprises a 'normal' mass, either hierarchically above the marked minority (e.g. time on [unmarked] versus time off [marked] work) or between two ends of a spectrum (e.g. genius [marked] – sanity [unmarked] – madness [marked]). This can give a misleading impression of the empirical prevalence of the marked. Colourful, stark and vivid images of extreme behaviour easily slip into caricature and stereotype. Extreme cases are perceived as if widespread and typical rather than rare and unusual, "*making the episodic appear endemic*" (Brekhus 1998: 37).

This creates an 'epistemological blindspot' (ibid.) about unmarked social categories, which remain 'seen but unnoticed' (Garfinkel 1967). We dismiss the ordinary human traffic of social life as mundane, familiar, profane and neutral, neglecting to study it. Nothing is an emblematic case in point. Although the sociology of everyday life has contributed some redress, recognising 'doing nothing' by acts of commission, little attention has been given to the corresponding notion of 'non-doing'/'non-being' by acts of omission.

Brekhus calls for the foregrounding of background phenomena to put them under the sociological microscope. 'Reverse-marking' is achieved by inverting the contrast between Gestalt figure and ground, to study the negative space around marked social objects. This is an established style in architecture, art, photography and comedy, and could be extended to sociology. For example, in 2016, Princeton Professor Johannes Haushofer published his 'CV of failures', which listed the 'Awards and scholarships I did not get', 'Research funding I did not get' and 'Paper rejections from academic journals'. He accounted for this as deliberate reverse-marking, aiming to "*give some perspective*" on the competitive, individualistic culture of academia: "*Most of what I try fails, but these failures are often invisible, while the successes are visible...This sometimes gives others the impression that most things work out for me.*" (*The Guardian*, 30 April 2016).

However, we can go further than gazing at terrains and landscapes. Negative social space is filled with reflexive actors working to accomplish nothing, through acts of both commission and omission. Furthermore, this is an interactive process, which Symbolic Interactionism can illuminate: how are the meanings of nothing defined and negotiated in relational encounters? How do we experience the things we do not do, and what stories do we tell (or not tell) about them? In the remainder of this paper, I outline four different ways in which nothing can be reinterpreted as meaningful social interaction. Paradoxically, practices of silence, invisibility and emptiness are redefined respectively as voluble, conspicuous and

potent. They can have significant effects on social forms, from micro-level interaction order to macro-level patterns, normative institutions and cultural scripts. Reverse-marking the expanse of negative social space surrounding us shows how apparent 'nothingness' in fact comprises 'something' worthy of study.

Four dimensions of nothingness

Non-identity

Nothing resides in self-identities that are based on not doing or being certain things. This can work in two ways. Firstly, we may actively repudiate a role-identity or the activities associated with it, as something unwanted and unwelcome. By acts of commission, we positively choose to be a 'non-'something, and feel proud of that disregard. As Williams (2000) argues, social identities are relational, defined as much by what they are *not* as by what they are. This is a conscious, reflexive process of *dis-identification*. For example, Skeggs (2004) shows how middle class identities based on 'respectability' are defined by contrast to the presumed non-respectability of the working class. Abject subjectivities are powerfully constructed through politically charged discourses about socially devalued characteristics, but their rejection generates further, oppositional identities. The latter are unmarked, yet meaningful to their claimants.

'Ex-' identities are also actively constructed through dis-identification. Ebaugh (1988) documented the process of role exit, whereby people actively dissociate themselves from a previously significant identity. This is a moral career trajectory (Strauss 1969), whereby encounters and relationships with significant others influence the sequential stages of identity formation, even when the identity in question is based on *no longer* being or doing something. For example, twelve step therapy groups mediate the process of becoming an ex-alcoholic or ex-drug addict (Denzin 1987, Weinberg 1996, Scott 2011). Here again, negational identities generate new positively defined, symbolic social objects that are significantly meaningful (Blumer 1969).

Alternatively, we may construct 'never-identities' (Mullaney 2001), based on things we have decided not to do and consequently never done. Any action entails the exclusion of alternatives, and these paths not chosen can be equally significant in meaning. Mullaney gives the example of voluntary virginity when framed as chastity: moral or religious reasons are cited to account for such 'never-doings'. Despite being negatively defined, these are actively chosen, consciously built and purposely communicated presentations of self (Goffman 1959). Mullaney emphasises that never-identities are based not merely on absence, but on 'demonstrated resistance' to temptation: identity claims reference a shared set of values, presenting oneself as morally superior to, and signifying cultural distinction (Bourdieu 1984) from practices of doing.

Secondly, we can develop non-identities through more passive acts of omission: processes of attrition, lack or deficiency, indexing something that is not there but might have been. This is a process of *non-identification* rather than dis-identification: the symbolic object hovers below the threshold of awareness, not meaning enough to be seen and consciously rejected. Non-identification concerns potential identities that have not emerged, particularly where this is viewed as deviant or unusual. Here, the non-development of the characteristic is marked, while the normatively expected development of it is unmarked. For example, asexuality is negatively defined in a deficiency model, as a lack of 'normal' sexual desire

and/or attraction (Carrigan 2011). Yet this may not be a personally meaningful basis of self-identity: some asexual people report that they do not define themselves as such; the characteristic only becomes relevant when noticed and problematized by others in the unmarked majority (Scott et al 2016).

The career trajectory of *non-becoming* is the mirror image of the trajectory of becoming, involving key encounters with others that lead an actor away from, rather than towards, a potential social identity (Scott et al 2016). Just as Becker (1963) outlined the interactive social process of learning to do or to become, we also learn how *not* to do (Mullaney 2001). Relations, interactions and negotiations occurring at each step create negative definitions and meanings about the characteristic. A process of cumulative attrition occurs, whereby everyone starts out from the same point of potential identity building, but more and more fall off the path at every step, not reaching their destination (Scott et al 2016).

An important difference between the two career trajectories of *becoming a 'non-'* (dis-identification through acts of commission) and *non-becoming* (non-identification through acts of omission) is the question of reversibility. In the first case, Mullaney suggests that never-identities are irreversible, because if one ever does the repudiated thing, the claim to 'neverness' is irrevocably lost. For example, if a chaste person ever has sex, they can no longer claim to be a virgin, even if they thereafter permanently refrain and 'never again' do it (Mullaney 2001). Ex-identities are also irreversible: someone who gives up drinking can only be a 'recovering addict', never a non-drinker. The stigmatised former self remains seated on the wagon as a symbolic object of temptation: the 'trickster within' (Weinberg 1996). By contrast, the non-becoming trajectory is reversible, as a person may drop off but later climb back onto a path away from a potential identity. For example, people who define themselves as asexual (i.e. not sexual) may at some point experiment with sex to explore the normative alternative, and build intimate relationships with allosexual (non-asexual) partners (Scott et al 2016). Thus identity by commission precludes identity by omission, but not vice versa.

Non-identities based on non-doing can remain unmarked, if they represent the normative majority. When it is conventional and socially approved of not to do/be something, this is unlikely to form the basis of identity. For example, heterosexual people rarely mobilise this as a political identity or need to come out as non-LGBTQ. Some acts are deemed by 'common sense' reasoning to be so obviously un-doable that we would not remark upon their not being done: we do not need to identify as non-rapists or non-murderers. Other things are explicitly forbidden, but this obligation to not-do is normatively required and positively sanctioned. Mullaney refers to the anthropological literature on cultural taboo, whereby ritualised action is collectively performed to demonstrate avoidance, separation and differentiation from contaminating ideas (Durkheim 1912, Gell 1979). Repudiation and disgust towards cultural materials delineates a symbolic boundary between the sacred and profane (Durkheim, *ibid*; Douglas 1966), strengthening social solidarity.

Inactivity and inertia

Secondly, we can study the actions that people do not do, and their social consequences. As with identity, we can make a distinction between positive *decisions not to* (acts of commission, or doing nothing) and negative *non-decisions* (acts of omission, or non-doing). We can 'act by not acting' (Loy 1985) when inertia has unintended consequences.

In the first case, *decisions not to*, the actor makes a deliberate choice to eschew a potential line of action (Goffman 1967) that might otherwise have been significant and may be normatively expected, rendering themselves socially conspicuous. Doing nothing through 'intentional non-action' (Kühn et al 2009: 542) is designed with 'foreseeable consequences' (ibid.), which may be publicly visible and confer communicative meaning. For example, 'voter apathy' is a misnomer for the active decision not to vote as a protest against the electoral system. Alternatively, the thing that one decides not to do may go publicly unnoticed but still be of great personal significance and 'fatefulness' (Goffman 1967) for self-identity. For example, turning down a job offer may close off a potential career path and the social world that would have come with it, through shared activities and collegial relationships.

In the second case, *non-decisions*, an unintentional neglect or 'failure' to do something can nevertheless be significant and consequential. For example, a woman may not have children in her lifetime, not because she actively rejects the cultural ideology of motherhood, but just because her personal circumstances have not made it possible or desirable. She did not purposefully 'decide not to', but things just turned out that way. She may reflect upon her non-doing variously, as something she feels glad about, regrets, or wishes other people had seen differently, and wonder how her life might have turned out if she had done it.

In both cases, a non-performed (negative) action triggers an alternative course of (positive) action that is done instead. The non-doing of something must logically imply the doing of something else: a line of action that *is* performed, *does* shape the actor's identity, and leads into a different social realm. Thus a negatively defined symbolic social object is not like a black hole, destroying energy and matter; on the contrary, it has the power to generate a whole other chain of events in the social world, which would not otherwise have existed if the original (not-done) action had been taken.

We can study these consequential positives as phenomena in their own right, and explore how their meaning is shaped by the actor's perception of them as *alternatives* or *replacements*. These meanings may be different from those that would have been attributed to the same activity if it had been pursued for its intrinsic value, as Plan A rather than Plan B. For example, if not having children facilitates a woman pursuing a high status professional career, her experience of the latter may involve an appreciation of how it has been enhanced by the sacrifice she made, and an awareness of how it could otherwise have been curtailed. Thus when considering the positive consequences of negative action, we can make an analytical separation between actors' (a) reflections on what *has* happened because of what they have *not done*, and (b) imagination of what *could have* happened if they had *not done the non-doing*.

Remembering Brekhus's argument that unmarked phenomena comprise the majority of social life, we can observe that inactivity is much more common than activity. This is partly a practical matter: there is only a limited amount of things we can do within the temporal constraints of a lifetime, but an infinite amount of things we can not-do. Even at the micro-level, "[d]aily life involves various incidents of intentional non-action" (Kühn et al 2009: 542), from not getting up early to go jogging to not replying to an email, not wearing make-up or not tipping the waiter. To the extent that these potential actions are discernable on the perceptual radar as being realistically plausible, they are consciously unperformed by acts of commission, and vice versa: we are aware of failing to put in extra hours at work because we know we could have done, whereas we are not aware of failing to ride an elephant to the dentist's. This echoes Schütz's (1972) phenomenological argument that we bracket out from

our streams of consciousness those objects of perception that are not pragmatically useful to the execution of our quotidian lives.

Aside from its pragmatic necessity, inertia may be the dominant, preferred human state. Cognitive psychologists argue that, unless we can perceive a positive motivation to do something, our default inclination is to do nothing, accept the status quo and avoid instigating change (Anderson 2003; Tykocinski and Pittman 1998; Kühn et al 2009). Additionally, we avoid responsibility for change, by delaying and postponing decisions, or choosing options we perceive as non-decisions (Anderson, *ibid.*). When choice deferral is not possible, we find omission bias: a preference for options that do not require action (Spranca et al 1991). Thus Anderson (2003) makes a distinction between procrastination and decision avoidance, where the former means deferring making a decision and/or acting on it, and the latter means being indecisive or not making a decision at all. This maps onto the distinction between (commisive) *decisions not to* and (omissive) *non-decisions*, where the former involve more voluntary intentionality than the latter (Kühn et al 2009). Of course, we can also procrastinate about making a decision, bringing the two forms of inactivity together.

Decision avoidance may appear irrational if it results in outcomes contrary to the actor's interests, but it can still be subjectively meaningful. 'Defensive decision avoidance' occurs "*when there may be risks to maintaining the status quo but the prospect of discovering better alternatives appears grim*" (Anderson 2003: 140). For example, patients 'at risk' of some genetic disorders may nevertheless avoid clinical screening tests through fear of the consequences of diagnosis (Scott et al 2005). Similarly, 'inaction inertia' occurs when failing at a first opportunity leads to declining a second opportunity that is less attractive but still beneficial (Tykocinski and Pittman 1998), because that outcome would be *relatively* disappointing. Nobody wants a consolation prize. For example, a student who is not accepted into their first choice of university feels reluctant to take up an alternative offer from a lower status institution. 'Counterfactual thinking' occurs through comparing one's actual situation with hypothetical alternatives, whether these are imagined to be better (upward counterfactuals) or worse (downward counterfactuals) (Markman et al 1993).

This can evoke emotions, whether anticipated (e.g. regret or shame) or anticipatory (e.g. relief or dread, felt in the present) (Anderson 2003). Inaction inertia functions as a regret management technique (Tykocinski and Pittman 1998), as declining subsequent opportunities allows us to avoid, escape or stop anticipated counterfactual regret. This resonates with Goffman's (1952) discussion of 'cooling the mark out', whereby actors adjust to humiliating failures so as to save face. Cooling out strategies may be designed pre-emptively, to prevent status loss from occurring in the first place rather than to mitigate its effects. For example, the aspiring artist who never manages to leave their day job may be unconsciously not-doing through fear of failure: it is safer not to try, keeping the illusion of potential brilliance intact.

Absence, invisibility and emptiness

Next, we can consider forms of non-presence in social life. Nothingness involves not doing, not being, but also not *having* symbolic objects, whose absence leaves a void. This negative space is meaningful despite (or rather because of) its emptiness, as are the forms recognised to be missing from it. As Mumford (2017) argues, there is a paradoxical significance to the 'negative truths' suggested by metaphysical non-entities, which gives them epistemological status. The notion of 'absent presence', discussed in the sociology of the body (Shilling

2012), is a useful way of conceptualising these social forms: things that are not actually there can nevertheless be perceived, imagined or remembered, and these ghostly figures are symbolic objects to which actors orient their social action (cf. Weber 1904). Furthermore, the recognition of these absences can motivate actors to pursue alternative courses of action – having something else instead – reminding us of the creative potential of nothing to generate something new.

As with the previous types of nothing, we can distinguish between two categories of absent forms: those that once were present but then disappeared (through acts of commission), and those that have never existed (through acts of omission). For example, miscarriage and stillbirth are very different experiences from infertility, despite concerning concern the same absent object (Lovell 1983). This corresponds to the aforementioned difference between positively doing/being nothing (having a ‘not-something’, as an invisible symbolic object that is lost and missed) and negatively non-doing/non-being by passive default (not-having and never having had something hypothetically possible).

In the first case, a once-present object disappears from the realm of the socially ‘real’ but remains personally significant. Bereavement is the most obvious example, but other losses range from the mundane to the poignant. Hair loss, for example, may occur slowly and predictably through the natural ageing process, or suddenly and traumatically through chemotherapy treatment. Many lost objects are embodied, perhaps because the tangibility of something so intimately entwined with the self generates the most intense phenomenological experiences. West (2010) found that people affected by alopecia described the experience of unexpected hair loss as devastating, because their altered physical appearance threatened their sense of identity.

Sometimes the lost object reappears as a ghost or apparition. The memory and knowledge of what once had been looms large in consciousness, so that the past continues to haunt the present. Ghostly encounters with spooky phenomena create ‘uncanny experiences’ in everyday life (Waskul and Waskul 2016). Missing body parts can serve as dark reminders of sacrifice, trauma and victimhood, for example when limb amputation follows military service or terrorist attacks, but equally, their meanings can be positively redefined, such as mastectomy scars borne proudly as evidence of survival and resilience (Hopkins 2003).

Ghostly figures can be discursively constructed and invoked to create a climate of moral panic, labelling and deviancy amplification: alluding to people who are not there but whose imagined apparition carries a silent, lurking threat. Scenes of nothingness are reimagined as potentially dramatic social events, just waiting to happen. Cohen (1972) showed how media coverage of the 1960s Mods and Rockers subculture included reports on peaceful seaside towns in which nothing was actually happening, but which were ominously braced to be invaded by these ‘folk devils’ as imaginary objects of fear.

The effects of the absent object can extend beyond the individual directly implicated to their wider social network. Hogben (2006) discusses how the family and friends of missing persons found their lives disrupted by the ghostly figure in their midst. Temporal destabilisation and desynchronisation occurred as they reconfigured the relationship between a shared past and a separate, uncertain future. Ambiguity arose in everyday decisions, such as whether or not to continue marking birthdays and anniversaries on their private calendars (Sacks 1987). There were symbolic implications of both doing so (feeling the absence all the more intensely) and not doing so (acknowledging that the person might

never return). The temporal vacuum occupied when life was put 'on hold' was filled by acts of waiting, worrying and hoping: nothingness, again, created something.

In the second case, absent objects have never existed but are imagined, as hypothetical potentials. Gillespie (2003) discusses the meanings women give to voluntarily avoiding motherhood. This can be framed either positively (being 'child-free' as liberation [Park 2002]) or negatively (being 'child-less' as a culturally stigmatised failure of femininity [Letherby 2002]). In practice, Gillespie argues, women's accounts combine both elements, citing both 'push' and 'pull' factors. The vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940) on which they draw includes negative constructions, such as the freedom *not* to do or be what motherhood represents (sacrifices of autonomy) as much as positive constructions of what not-having enables (financial security, travel, hobbies). Similar ambivalence is observed in Jamieson and Simpson's (2015) study of single-person living as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, offering freedom and privacy, but on the other, evoking loneliness. In both of these examples, the never-possessed object is vividly imagined and contextually used to make sense of one's current situation. To understand oneself as single or childless/child-free, one must first imagine what it would have been like to have these foregone things, and what it means – personally, socially and culturally – to be without them.

If lost or never-held objects leave emptiness in our lives, what do we use to fill the spaces? Just as not-doing or not-being one thing logically implies doing or being another, not-having leads us to seek replacement objects that offer alternative meanings.

In the first case, we memorialise lost objects with visible reminders of their previous existence. Sometimes these serve a practical function, doing the work that the original thing used to do, such as wigs, prosthetic limbs and other 'stigma objects' (Goffman 1963). Other times they hold more symbolic value and take on a sacred significance as revered objects. Photographs, letters, clothing and possessions are kept to remember the dead and give them a place among the living, while more public displays of collective grief are expressed through spontaneous shrines, ghost bikes and roadside memorials (Santino 2005).

In the second case, we cannot memorialise something that has never been, but we can imagine and wonder about it. Biographical narratives about lost opportunities and roads not taken in life may help us to make sense of what might have been. In contrast to the grief stories told about mortified objects, such as the anguished account of a former rugby player whose spinal injury ended his sporting career (Smith and Sparkes 2008), tales of never-held objects assume a more wistful, nostalgic tone as we try to grasp the intangible (Davis 1979). The negative object is used to perform narrative identity work on the current self and account for its actions. This can involve putting a positive spin on events to make the best of them: "*Not having x meant that I got y instead.*" Alternatively, we can invoke the 'if only' motif, feeling more regret for what we have *not* done in life than for what we have done (Tykocinski and Pittman 1998).

A final form of invisibility concerns actors who are ostensibly present in the frontstage region, where the action is (Goffman 1967), yet not fully immersed in the performance. Non-persons (Goffman 1959) are those who support others' self-presentation but are themselves ignored, such as domestic servants. They are seen but not acknowledged, "*defined... as someone who is not there*" (Goffman 1959: 150-1). Role distance (Goffman 1961) is a state of detachment and estrangement from the role that one is playing, whereby the actor self-consciously reflects upon the situation as contrived. This often happens with roles we are reluctant to perform because they feel degrading to dignity and status. Splitting off the 'real'

self from the projected character, actors perform disengagement as a meta-commentary of symbolic apology for what the role implies: *"the individual makes a plea for disqualifying some of the expressive features of the situation as sources of definition of himself [sic]."* (Goffman 1961: 93). This can be read as a micro-gesture of resistance, demonstrating autonomous agency by allowing symbolic escape from a situation one cannot physically leave (Cohen and Taylor 1992). Role distance communicates the actor's apprehension of nothingness: the situation is not meaningfully connected to the self.

Absence, lack and emptiness therefore loom large in the experience of detachment. Boredom has similarly been theorised as a state of agitated restlessness arising from the perceived absence of meaning (Barbalet 1999) and lack of momentum (Brissett and Snow 1993) in a situation. It is common in ritualised, routinised tasks where we feel under-stimulated (Conrad 1997) and identity work cannot be pursued. Phenomenologically, boredom is a sensation of blockage, numbness and petrification, of being suspended in a vacuum of nothingness (Bargdill 2000). Yet boredom is also interactive, when these feelings are dramaturgically displayed to an audience (Darden 1999). For example, consider the academic who sits in a meeting doing other work or answering emails on their phone: a role distant performance to convey their importance beyond this demeaning situational predicament. Conspicuous absenteeism - being visibly non-present - is a display of status and identity: a claim to significance and somethingness when trapped within a void of circumstantial nothingness.

Silence and quietness

Nothing can be practised through verbal denials and declinations. From the pregnant pause in conversation to consumer boycotts, we make our feelings known by saying nothing. We can keep quiet in various ways and for various reasons - failing to speak, answering negatively, or offering only a muted response - and we can also refuse to listen to others. Another distinction can be made between acts of commission and omission: positively *saying 'no'* (literally or through other gestures of refusal) and negatively *not saying* (declining to speak at all). However, in both cases, the non-voicing of positive attitudes, thoughts and feelings is a meaningful social action, which affects interaction order (Goffman 1983). Audiences expecting to hear something instead encounter nothing, and interpret this meaning as deviant. Nothingness is heard, and becomes a symbolic social object towards which further social action is oriented. Paradoxically, silence speaks volumes: by saying nothing, a voice sounds all the more audibly.

Silent protests constitute a strategy of passive resistance to requests, demands and expectations. One form is secrecy: refusals to tell or share private information. As Simmel (1908) noted, objects, knowledge and ideas that are restricted become more desirable and valuable by virtue of their inaccessibility. Secrets assume a mysterious, fascinating allure that makes them socially powerful. This is particularly significant for marginalised and disempowered social groups. The 'right to remain silent' offered to legal defendants is one of the few ways in which they can exercise agency in an otherwise coercive and tightly constrained situation (Green 2011). Lying by omission (concealing truths rather than committing falsehoods) can be an agentic choice to protect one's status (Morrow 2013), just as tact and discretion oil the wheels of interaction (Scott 2012).

In the sociology of mental health, silent non-compliance has been theorised as a commissive strategy of resistance. Laing (1960) and the anti-psychiatrists argued that apparent

symptoms of 'madness', such as withdrawal and hallucination, were in fact sane, rational attempts to extricate oneself from distorted and confusing patterns of communication within the family. Making oneself incomprehensible defended the ontological boundaries of the self against invasion, protecting personal integrity. Similar ideas were suggested by feminist theories of anorexia as a symbolic protest against patriarchal standards of beauty, taking them to grotesque, parodic extremes. Not eating, like not working, was a conspicuous display of non-participation: a hunger strike (Orbach 2005).

Quietness can be performed in protest against Western, individualised cultures of talk, and thus the 'power of quiet' might be politically reclaimed by introverts (Cain 2013). However, this is not the case for all forms of interpersonal reticence. Shyness is often (mis-)perceived as rudeness because it is assumed that people are lazily and selfishly refusing to participate, not sharing the responsibility for making conversations work (Scott 2007). However, the subjective experience of shyness suggests the opposite: involuntary inhibition and a frustrated desire to participate, due to feelings of relative incompetence. 'Shy' actors' accounts reveal how much dramaturgical labour goes into managing this everyday performance (Scott, *ibid.*).

Being silenced by others reflects an exercise of power, imposing acts of omission. Postcolonial theorists have critically examined how indigenous knowledges and versions of events get written out of history (Bhambra 2014). Feminist critiques are levelled at the 'body-shaming' culture that places taboos on speaking about menstruation (Martin 1992). Rape and other crimes of sexual violence are under-reported because victims anticipate being shamed, blamed or disbelieved (Phipps 2014). Not listening is another means of disempowering and delegitimising 'other' voices through the dynamics of exclusion (Lemert 1962). Smith (1987) discussed how this 'cutting out procedure' operated in decisions that a person was mentally ill: family and friends conspired to build a narrative account that denied the patient themselves the right to bear witness to their own experiences.

Muteness, subtlety and understatement comprise a final way of saying nothing. Turning down the volume on an identity performance can enhance its effects, through symbolic gestures of restraint that mediate social presence. Flower (2016) observed the 'little dramatic reductions' (averted eyes, derisory sniffs, turning away) used by defence lawyers in the courtroom to express their scepticism towards the prosecution. The 'less is more' approach also operates in comedy, where dryness, irony and sardonic understatement communicate a message more effectively than blunt, explicit joking (Green 2011). Subtle laughter can play a role in police interviews, for both parties: suspects buttress their claims to innocence by framing accusations as ridiculous, while officers interject chuckles to challenge these very claims (Carter 2011). Some forms of understatement indicate broader cultural trends, such as the civilisation of emotional displays (Elias 1994). Politeness rituals, such as apologies and requests, are often phrased indirectly to convey deference, humility and respect (Brown and Levinson 1978). For example, in the Nordic cultural code of Jante Law, which discourages individual pride in favour of collectivist modesty, *not* talking about oneself is positively welcomed (Scott 2017).

Conclusion

Nothingness has been neglected by sociology, because of our preoccupation with positively defined objects, actions and identities. Responding to calls for the reverse marking of negative social space, this paper has elucidated some of the symbolic social objects that

comprise this shadowy domain. In Weberian terms, the absence of social phenomena is accomplished through meaningful social action. Moreover, processes of social *interaction* are involved in the reception, definition and negotiation of these meanings. I make an analytical distinction between two categories of social nothingness: doing/being a non-something (through acts of commission) and not-doing/not-being something (through acts of omission). In the first case, nothing is demonstrably performed through non-participation, eschewal and repudiation, leading to the constitution of symbolic objects such as non- and never-identities, conspicuous absence and rejected options. In the second case, nothing is more passively arrived at by default, through failures to act, inertia and unrealised potential. I have explored how this dichotomy plays out in four dimensions: non-identity, inactivity, absence and silence. Whether accomplished through commission or omission, nothing is creative and productive, generating new social objects and shaping relationships. As well as things not done, there are things done instead, ghosts of things once-present, and imaginings of things that could have been. The meanings of these consequential forms are also interactively defined and managed. 'Nothing' as a social accomplishment, therefore, has implications for self, others and interaction order, making it paradoxically 'something' worthy of study.

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